

The sailor pulled to the rhythm of blades kerplunking into the water beneath the Mable Gray. Once docked in Duine the Captain would give a time for morning muster, assign watch, and then to the tavern with the rest. The sailor couldn't think of ale, steady ground, or the stench rolling past him from the swamp. The sailor could only see, hear, feel every labored breath of the crew urging the Mable Gray to dock. The Captain's command to stow oars was his only indication of arrival. He hadn't even noticed the two ropes that had been tossed to the dock for anchors.

The work went fast as practice would have it. The Mable was secured and sailors began to huddle in a group just inside the harbor. They turned to face their Captain. He barked a report time for the morning, said a few unlucky names, and then the men vanished in a whirlwind of pounding feet. There was nothing left to do save sleep below deck. There would be no sailors left on board tonight except for the downtrodden watchmen.

There were no women in the tavern that didn't have husbands. Any messing with the woodsmen of Duine or their few wives and making trade here would become hard for a Captain. So instead they drank often, sometimes fought, but mostly told stories. The stories of the fabled, flying dragons that circled the deepest parts of ocean could be heard from the oldest salt in a tavern. The sailor liked best to hear about the mermaids that swam alongside ships. In effort to cross the Mearim Sea, they raised sails centering the long boat. Half the oar teams stowed their blades along the tops of the Oak or Cedar that rested in canvass along the breadth of the mid deck. The sailor always took any chance he could to look down onto the prow, cutting whitewater below them, hoping to see a fair face. He never did.

The sailor stood just outside the tavern door, on the balcony. He watched the North River plunge two hundred meters into Silk River's beginning. The whitewater boiled in the fading light of evening. A log came down with an audible crash over the roaring water. The sailor kept his eyes where the Cedar had landed. After a few breaths the plunking sound gave away its presence as air displaced water for an instant. The log floated idly now and Daniel imagined himself hooking that beast from the water in the morning. He took a deep breath that reminded him of the swamp hidden to the west by Bramble Tower.

The stench made him strong and determined to go back inside. The tavern's walls were thick and the empty fireplace's gusty furnace provided the only ventilation. The stench of men's drinking was palpable compared to the bog that lay miles west. The wind carried that stench up the Silk River as the sweat of his back had carried himself to Duine's harbor.

The sun had set quickly when the drink began to flow. Duine's Tavern held the Silk River's only remedy for the antagonizing odor: strong ale. Drunken sailors sat in circles, keeping to their own. The woodsmen did the same. The light, blue, loose-fitting jerkins of the sailors outnumbered the woodsmen's dark tunics tonight. Daniel sat down at the bar to center himself directly in front of the cold, brick fireplace. A young man Daniel knew as the barman's boy, Lud, came and gave Daniel the only available drink. Daniel turned his back to the bar with his ale in hand, and faced the fireplace.

He had sat next to a pair of sailors, seeing as how they were the smallest group in the tavern. The nearest man sat with arched shoulders towards Daniel. On Daniel's other side sat a wall of brown, soft leather tunics. The shifting, brown wall took glances at Daniel all by himself.

Daniel eyed over the tavern. Except for the occasional glances from the woodsmen's largest group at the other end of the fireplace, everyone seemed deep in conversation with no regard for him. They loomed around a Great Oak table, adjacent the windowed wall, opposite Daniel. In a group of about twenty they were certainly the largest, but altogether against the hoard of ships that had landed just a day ago, they didn't amount to much. They began to talk loudly.

Daniel, at first, got odd phrases of stories just as they climaxed to the loud voice of the largest woodsman in the group. His fist, punctuating each exclamation of some pivotal point of the narrative, shook the sturdy Great Oak table. "Cedars wrapped up! Ready to GO!" The group guffawed in a myriad of harrumphs and rude gestures. "Leave it to Murray to fill up yer head with tall tales."

This spoken from an older, gray-haired man that ribbed the younger man next to him while he talked. Daniel caught the old man's eyes for a moment and was given a sneer from the gray head for eavesdropping. The younger noticed the change in his friend's face and turned to see Daniel sitting alone. The young man turned with the urges of whimsical youth shining in his green eyes. Before the broad shouldered, young woodsmen could speak, Daniel spoke first.

"That's quite a story." Daniel hadn't heard the story at all really, but anything ending in wrapped Cedar had to be good. "What'd-ya know about it?" The boy talked as Daniel moved in wide sways, as if still aboard the ship he had only just left, toward the fireplace. As Daniel came closer the boy finished his glare with a flat voiced, "Delivery boy." Daniel stopped short of the brick hearth to turn and face the Great Oak table that lounged twenty woodsmen, all of them staring at him now.

Daniel heard no stools scrape the floor, no protest, or curses. *I must of been the only one who'd heard the slight.* "Surely no one'd take offense to my payment of Duine's fine ale for the procurement of ye lads tall tales." The youth looked confused and then quickly angry again. A gnarled hand lay on the boy's shoulder like a root suddenly growing over his back. "Easy there Caleb. The man means to buy us drinks for a story. And the way ol'Murray yells and raves this old *semen* will hear it anyways." "That's a damn fine point!" Murray exclaimed. Duck Murray moved forward with a woodsmen's sure step. The heels planted first and his hips settled a moment before the next step. *Prepared* would be the presence attained by a woodsmen's grace. The small ax he wore at his hip seemed well used, well taken care of.

"They don't need my loud voice to make'm tall though. They do that on their own." Daniel's tensions eased, as the big man's acceptance seemed to calm the group. The youth, Caleb, took a seat at the end of the Oaken table. Daniel fetched the stool from the bar and made himself a seat by the hearth. Lud gave Daniel a weary look when he began to pick up the heavy Oak chair. The look settled when Daniel removed his purse to reveal some silver. "Enough for these men, the storytellers of Duine." He pressed the silver into Lud's palm. The boy fled. The older men in the woodsmen's group frowned at Daniel's comment. Murray took it as his personal introduction.

"When the grove went bad nearly the entire population of Duine took passage through the Mearim Sea. To seek work...wherever." Murray put his hands through thick black hair. His voice was a rumble with inflection-a slow building thunderhead, ready at any moment to discharge lightening with ringing prose. The storm, for now, kept Daniel in anticipation of the crash.

"Now-adays a woodsman can tell any beast by their piss as well as their prints. But not so long ago, there was only the creatures of the South Side Grove and they weren't that bad. The hunt for wild boar was a rare thing and hunters only ventured so far as seemed safe into the Perilous Forest. The only crop that could grow in those days was the mulberry tree and those were the only things tough enough *to* grow. Now-adays its nothin' will grow!" Murray spat into the ashes, un-swept by Lud, piled on the hearth before continuing.

"It was the men who stayed while the silk maidens of Duine slipped down into the Silk River's green mouth and away into the Mearim Sea. The silk worms didn't last long after the mulberry trees died out. The town could not survive on just the occasional Tree that rumbled down from the North River. It was Perrin Duine, Harim's great nephew, who gathered his friends to convince them into the Perilous Forest. There was no knowledge of the deep dark, no flare for help, no harpy eagle for warning." Caleb scoffed at the thought of Reedy not being at camp to look after his friends. Murray continued with no notice.

"There was only Perrin Duine's conviction that Paul, Dave, and himself should go fell their own Grand Cedar. The legends of a Cedar grove had forever plagued the hearts of Duine's young in those days. It was now, in this time of desperation, that it was given fertile soil to grow. The three young men sat where we are today, scheming their venture into the Perilous Forest. The reality of it's happening now beginning to sink in."

"What about the poison?" Murray did his best Paul Buck impression with not much success burdened with his deep voice. "We'll oil our gloves with that sap glue the silk maidens left in the long house. There's plenty of it left and, with nothing to put into those jars besides dead silk worms, I doubt anyone will mind us making use of it, especially when

we haul us back a Cedar." Murray finished with another pound of his fist. He did a much better impression of Perrin.

"So they gathered their tools. They skirted Harim Trail and made a slower path through the decaying stumps of the old South Side Grove. They stopped in homes long abandoned, and collected tools from friends that had just left them there. On the river barges that stopped in Duine there was only so much room to be had. Soon the group was equipped with several short axes, a link-saw carried between them, and Perrin sported the long ax with a Good Oak handle."

"Silver's what they needed, the damn fools!" Murray snapped angrily, "Who's tellin' this damn story Nigel." Nigel Olson smiled at Murray and cracked his old knuckles loudly. "Like I said, those boys didn't know about the deep dark back then like we do. This is before the likes of Balin Duine and Tud Daralux took to blazin' trails all over hell and half of Noreathia." Nigel settled himself with a gulp of ale. He eyed Daniel as if expecting something. Daniel didn't know what to expect himself. *Why the hell do they need silver to fell some tree?* Daniel didn't ask questions. Nigel let him be and didn't interrupt again as Murray continued.

"They made their way up Harim trail toward the long house, before it was the saw mill. The inside was lined with hundreds of cages, filled with bushels of mulberry leaves, long gone brown. The center aisle still held coal and some pots to be set on the braziers. The coal looked old and used up. The jars would last forever. The enchanted Oak cask were molded in Deseado and shipped here at the founding of the silk maiden's long house. Financed by the King at Duine's founding. On a table set into the wall were smaller jars stacked up nearly to the ceiling. Perrin made for those.

He passed some out to Dave and Paul. With a surety meant for himself as much for his comrades Perrin told each one of his friends to tuck in their boots and gloves. They brought cloaks and oiled those up too. The sap mixture inside the jars had protected silk from the roaring whitewater of the Silk River Falls." "Why will it work for poison too?" Murray's Dave was a proper, prim man. A far stretch on all accounts for Murray's acting ability. "Why wouldn't it? I hear that's how the alchemist in Deseado do it when they carpenter the stuff." He took another drink of ale and gave Daniel a look in the eyes. "Paul and Dave both did as Perrin said, and tucked their gloves farther up their sleeves. Then swabbed globs of amber onto their clothes to seal arms and legs into leather.

Perrin led those two lads up Harim's trail into the high hills north of the longhouse. He had the idea that coming downhill through the forest would make it easier to cover more ground. Skirting Harim's Trail the entire time, Perrin intended to go no further than a few hundred meters into the Perilous Forest at any one time. They would scout in half circles southwest until they found the Silk River again." "Or the Cedar grove," interrupted a slim man sitting straight-backed in his chair. "Stop it Pope. I don't know what I'll do if it's *you* that starts interrupting me." Pope raised a hand in silent apology and let Murray continue.

"They started into the woods from the north. They worked their way down steep slopes and cut through draws, thick with vines. Often Perrin led them west, then east again to keep from losing the wide trail. The steep hills continued the Perilous Forest and never seemed to slack long before gradually wearing down the heavily burdened group." "These blades weigh the shoulders. The straps are cutting into my skin" Murray held up his hands in play of small Paul Buck. "Look Perrin there's blood." Murray finished with Perrin's

famously coined phrase, "You'll be bleedin' fiercer than that if we find a Cedar and you ain't got them blades." "Chief Balin does it better," chimed Caleb. "Well he ain't here," sneered Murray.

"Soon Perrin Duine led his friends over a steep cliff. One by one they jumped down the small drop and into a clearing. Before Perrin could sound a warning he saw the red eyes of a wolf staring into him from two meters away. Two resounding crashes into the brambling floor made Perrin wince each time as the wolf gazed on without blinking." Murray stared hard now into Daniel's eyes as he whispered, "Follow." "That was all the wolf said before leaping without warning onto Paul and ripping out his throat with a quick pull of a mussel." Murray snarled for inflection on the gruesome act.

"Blood splattered his brothers before they could draw an ax against the beast. Its dark coat flexed with one final rip as a gurgling spray rained up from Paul's throat. Paul gave a spasm to fill his pants and then the cry of the anguished was his last to the world. With shuddering breaths Perrin grabbed Dave by his arm and ran away from the wolf, west.

Perrin and Dave both flew down the hillside at full speed now. They headed south with dead cuts west at every relief in the hillside. Perrin's heart was thundering as the wind dried Paul's warm blood on his face as he ran. The link-saws strapped to their backs felt like feathers now. The image of the wolf's mouth, red with Paul's wound put spurs into them. Dave lost his balance and turned to grab into the hillside. The roots offered no help as the earth came with him and he plowed a way through brush into the draw beneath them." "Are you alright?" shouted Murray as he feigned Perrin's interest in Dave's whereabouts.



"Perrin followed Dave's curses to find him tangled in vines that seemed to coil and flex when fought. Perrin's mouth hung open at the site of his friend covered in the writhing mess. With decision he closed his mouth and set to freeing his friend with his blade. Removing the Good Oak long ax from over his shoulder, Perrin attacked the vines with deadly accuracy. Each swipe knocked away limbs that recoiled with sounds like boiling water on cold stone. Dave freed his hand enough to cover his face with his cowl. The spray from the ax was wild and red with a thick cream. Perrin was glad for the protection of his leather tunic that suffocated his every pore. He swung into the roots and vines that troubled Dave.

Dave's face remained covered by the protection of his heavy cowl pulled down tight over his head. The slender snake seemed to stretch for miles from the canopy. The long green underbelly of the slight reptile led up to thick jowls filled with poison. In Perrin's ignored peripheral it came down without a sound to lay fangs into Dave's neck." Murray screamed with the pain of Dave's death. Pope gave a studious look to the floor. Dave's demise had always troubled the poor man. Daniel now understood why woodsmen hated sitting in the dark. Chief Balin had had the big bay windows put into the tavern by strong request of the many.

Murray finished his cry with both of his wide hands flat on the table. He looked into the cold ash of the fireplace and walked to it. Stooping on his heels, Murray took up a pile of ash in one palm. With the other hand he flattened the powder and began to play with it that way when he took his seat again. Without explanation to Daniel's quizzical brow Murray went on with the story.

"Perrin swung his ax wildly and cut the snake in half before it could release Dave. The bottom half of the snake fell for a full minute before becoming a coiled, bloody mess amongst the ruined vines lain about the forest floor by Perrin's ax. The vines finally released Dave so that he collapsed into that rubble to bleed along with it. Perrin lay down beside him to hold the swelling body of what was his friend. The body shuttered and jerked into something hideous and deformed. The sudden pink sliver cut across Perrin's vision and something became clearer in the bush.

The rough hide of leaves became scales that moved with flexing muscles. The bush moved to form the body of a beast like a lizard, but larger than most men. Not the fabled beast of the ocean. The real, writhing, green of the dragon appeared before Perrin. Thick legs, ending in a indiscernible number of claws, began to move towards him. The eyes moved to regard Perrin as it sensed being noticed." Murray clutched Pope's small shoulders, burying them in his large mitts, as he said, "Perrin released his friend to the forest as he did not recognize his face any longer." Murray released the self-proclaimed poet's shoulders dramatically. "Well said," murmured Pope. He shifted uneasily in his seat.

Daniel wanted to smirk unbelievably at the jest of such a thing's existence. The woodsmen had grown silent though. Caleb stared into his cup and past it into something else. Daniel held his smile and let himself imagine Murray's fabled beast as best he could. *I like the ones that can fly over the oceans better*, thought Daniel. Murray motioned with his hands, one still closed around the ash, to emphasize the size of the dragon's jaw. "The dragon opened its mouth to let out a warning hsssss. Thin, needles rowed the jaw top and bottom. They curved inward towards the back of the throat, but flexed outward when those jaws got wide enough to bite. The body was longer than any gator and stood up high

enough off the forest floor to look a man in the chest. Its tale curled behind it, and then suddenly snapped to strike a sapling in half with not a twitch from of it's fixed grin.

Lines of drool dripped from the dragon's mouth. When the mouth closed at the finish of the hiss Perrin saw a scaly, maw lathered in poison. Oozed menace from a scratchy, 'Follow,' whispered through unyielding features." Murray whispered the dragons command flatly with as little movement in his face as possible. *Quite a feat for a man that moved, swayed, and gestured with all of himself as he spoke,* thought Daniel.

"Perrin stepped forward. The dragon whipped its body completely around with the lethal appendage only missing Perrin by inches. The four-legged thing scampered further west. The poison and blood was still thick on the blade as Perrin picked up his long ax to race after it. The canopy hid the light more and more the further Perrin moved into the forest. There was no telling the distance he had moved away from Harim's Trail. With no light to guide him, Perrin crashed through the dark after the dragon's sounds of egress as it swiped down whatever lay in his path with its tail.

Fear of a similar fate as his friends snapped at Perrin's heels to urge his speed. The noise ceased. Perrin stopped to hear nothing stretch on in every direction like an audible wasteland. The night was completely dark." Murray stood up and walked towards the bar and then back towards the hearth to make a circle. Every so often he dropped a bit of ash. Daniel noticed that his drink was empty. "If'n you're alone in the forest and the world goes a dark on all sides of ya that's when you'll know if'n you're man. Not fore' then." He looked directly at Daniel and gave another glance to the unnoticed crowd of sailors. "Not fore' you've heard one of'em crashin' through the forest in the dark, and know that you're alone."

He came back around to the Oak table and leaned against his previous seat to stand. Caleb seemed proud, with his chin up, sitting next to him. Murray left his hands covered with the leftover ash. He straitened, seemed to regain something before he continued, "Perrin came to the conclusion that no matter the case, he must find shelter. Hoping for luck, Perrin stretched out his hands and began to take steps into the dark. With his heels firmly planted into each step, the forest floor became a test in patience as Perrin constantly came upon obstacles. Vines choked him as if given menacing souls; roots rose higher to bark his shins, and ever so faintly a low growl could be heard deep in the dark. Even the dead silence was sweeter to the ear than the chilling growls coming low from everywhere at once. Perrin kept moving.

The growls rumbled from the dark and pushed Perrin deeper west. The earth softened and soon he could see his hands in front of his face. With hopeful stares into the treetops Perrin finally made out a portion of the sky, in a break in the canopy, starry with light. He made for that patch of sky. If he could climb a tree, then perhaps he could get his bearings." Nigel straightened up at the mention of tree climbing. Murray hurried on before the old man could interrupt.

"The moonlight came down through the leaves of a Grand Cedar. The trunk as wide as any ship you've sailed, I'd bet my next pay on." Murray nodded at the sailor. Daniel nodded back fiercely in acquiesced agreement. "The base of the Tree was held up by roots that twisted in spirals untraceable by the human eye. The trunk itself was a lesson in illusion as the myriad of twists and turns made the mind bend if looked at too closely. Limbs hung down, heavy with black moss, slick with the oil of whatever pestilence surely

plagued such a foul place." Pope arched an eyebrow at Murray for quoting him without his consent. He was the only man who'd be prickly about such a thing.

"Perrin rested the long ax at the base of the largest root. He only carried the middle two feet of link-saw blade on his back. Without David or Paul's connecting ends the metal was just heavy. Perrin set it down with relief washing through every muscle in his back. A short ax, slung at his belt, was all that remained to him as he began to climb." Murray looked up with big, brown, hopeful eyes as he mimicked climbing up the center of the ash circle. He then showed ash colored palms to Daniel before turning to show the rest of the group. Murray feigned confusion and smelled his hands. Daniel watched his face become disgusted.

"Perrin smelled this foul ash that had covered him as he began to climb up the Cedar. Glowing eyes suddenly opened all around him. Mouths, aflame in pink-tongued screams, opened everywhere in the tree limbs. Perrin looked below him and picked his legs up to dodge a light green tale whipping past him. With no room to fall Perrin moved upward, and into the thick bush of the limbs. He seemed to awaken the entire dragon population of the forest with every shake of a branch.

Perrin's limbs were jelly squeezed in sacks. He moved on instinct and memory of what his limbs were supposed to do. They were supposed to help him survive. With hope clinging to him, despite the agony in his body, and perhaps to spite the beasts that ripped up the canopy all around him, Perrin kept his footing."

Nigel was looking at Caleb directly as Murray talked. Caleb gave him a blank stare back. Trying not to be defiant, trying not to be a child either. "Perrin made his way to the top and smelled the air above the Perilous Forest. He saw the forest stretch for kilometers

until flattening into the Silk River. The green sound was and is a staple to all sailors."

Daniel sat up waiting to be acknowledged. Murray continued without looking at him. He looked everywhere except at Daniel as he talked.

"Perrin looked east and found the cut into a southern facing hill, covered in small fire lights, now visible in the evening fade. He had not wondered as far as he had thought. Perrin searched his satchel and found a compass. Setting the course for forty-five degrees southwest Perrin saw his home. He also felt the tree shaking with angry dragons. Perrin removed his short ax and began cutting into a scaled face that had begun to claw its way towards him. With silent, furious, snarls flashing curved teeth the green demon backed down the tree with his fellow fiends. Cold, dead eyes regarded him in the fresh moonlight. The moonlight scattered in the leaves, and on the face of a bloodied dragon. Scaled lips were fixed in grins, and dripped with venom that hung in ropes down many faces.

In desperation Perrin leapt from the canopy towards the campfires of his home. The darkness became complete again as the canopy enveloped him. The limbs were not the hard ground, but they weren't pillows either. With hands groping, he grasped a vine and held on for dear life." Murray was gripping the vine now and looked as if ready to leap from the Oak table he had climbed. "The snap in his arms let him know death wasn't coming. One by one he snatched vines from the canopy until Perrin Duine felt the forest floor beneath his feet. A Good Oak, previously undiscovered, not 200 meters from the silk maidens long house, stood on Perrin's landing." Murray landed on flat feet in the center of the ash circle without spilling a drop of his nearly depleted ale.

Daniel scoffed before he could stop himself. Murray gave him a hard look before saying, "A woodsmen can climb any canopy, and take out any tree 'cause of Perrin's lessons.

At his friend's expense, no less, do we make our livin'. Rather than delivery boy's makin' big moans about ya damn boats." The youth broke in, "Some say that if we had gone northwest, followed the wolf, then we'd have found a whole Grand Oak grove. It's worth more ya know." Caleb spoke fast and to the point.

"Perrin could have been better off than that dragon nest in the Cedar." Pope sighed impatience. "No he'd just end up in a pack of wolves instead. Any woodsmen learns from Perrin's story, they sure as hell don't follow his footsteps." Murray turned away from Daniel to talk over Pope while Daniel tried to slip quietly out the door. "Sure as better be gettin' tha moral of the story, but not be makin' the same mistakes on behalf of the belief." Daniel put his finished mug of ale on the bar, "Yeah like the belief of talking, giant lizards." Daniel said sarcastically and finished with a cringe.

"Get the fuck outa' here before you call me a liar again." Daniel ducked the chair he had only just been sitting in. Lud yelled, some Captains in the corner chuckled, and Murray continued towards Daniel in long, sure steps. Daniel turned to leave before any more chairs were thrown at him. Woodsmen all carried axes and knives at all times with no one to tell them otherwise. Sailors were reprimanded by their Captains for carrying any weapon outside of their own decks. Those were the King's laws. No one knew anyone who agreed with it. Murray's meaty palm gripped the ax head at his hip.

Hands from all around sprouted and enraptured Duck Murray from the back. Olsen's voice eased him to the cool, brick fireplace to feel the wind that rushed down the flue. Lud handed Duck Murray another ale. He watched Daniel leave Duine's Tavern, "If nothin' else tha boy'll have a good story to tell," Murray chuckled.